Freedom food

New Internationalist Intermediate + Ready lesson
This lesson:

• Speaking (speaking and role play)
• Vocabulary
• Reading
• Language of suggestions, agreeing and disagreeing
• Writing: choice
What food can you see here?
fermented locust beans / fonio – a grain / traditional food from Sub-Saharan Africa
How much do you know about traditional African food?
- where can you buy it to cook?
- where can you eat it in restaurants?
- why is it not very common around the rest of the world?
I grew up in London with Sierra Leonean food: stews, rice, soup, cassava, rich leafy-green sauces, plantain, salmon, fried rice, jollof rice, of course – and so many other dishes.

For my grandmother – and her friends – cooking was a part of the day. She cooked for me, my parents, and cousins. If we were full, she would put leftovers in the freezer. Very often I opened a tub of ice cream to find last Tuesday’s okra soup.

Ingredients were everywhere in that house. Sometimes the kitchen was full of jugs of palm oil, piles of tripe and pig-foot in bowls from Lewisham market, baskets of plantain and newspaper filled with smoked fish. These early experiences of food gave me the idea that food is an important part of life. It made me want to learn more about ingredients and food cultures from Africa. It has so many different ways of gathering, preserving, and preparing food. Four chefs are helping me. They live between East and West Africa and cities in the Global North and they are cooking with indigenous grains, fruits, seeds, and vegetables.
Match:

1. tripe  a) A savoury taste like monosodium glutamate (one of the 5 basic tastes)
2. umami  b) A process that changes food or drink by adding enzymes / microorganisms eg. changing fruit into
c) The edible lining of the stomach of pigs, cows and sheep
d) Food that has been changed by mechanical or chemical action eg. to preserve it
e) Growing different food crops each year in turn to protect the soil
3. pod
4. to ferment
5. rotation
6. processed food
Key:

1. tripe  
   a) A savoury taste like monosodium glutamate (one of the 5 basic tastes)

2. umami  
   b) A process that changes food or drink by adding enzymes / microorganisms  
      eg. changing fruit into

3. pod  
   c) The edible lining of the stomach of pigs, cows and sheep

4. fermentation  
   d) Food that has been changed by mechanical or chemical action eg. to preserve it

5. rotation  
   e) Growing different food crops each year in turn to protect the soil

6. processed food  
   f) A long protective cover of seeds
Put these food words into these categories:

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>1.</th>
<th>2.</th>
<th>3.</th>
<th>4.</th>
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<th>12.</th>
<th>13.</th>
<th>14.</th>
<th>15.</th>
<th>16.</th>
<th>17.</th>
<th>18.</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>cassava</td>
<td>plantain</td>
<td>pigeon</td>
<td>okra</td>
<td>loquat</td>
<td>millet</td>
<td>pumpkin</td>
<td>yam</td>
<td>scotch bonnet chillies</td>
<td>fig</td>
<td>ngai ngai</td>
<td>locust bean</td>
<td>dawadawa</td>
<td>egusi</td>
<td>couscous</td>
<td>fonio</td>
<td>bambara beans</td>
<td>sorghum</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

Categories:
- a) grains
- b) fruit
- c) vegetables
- d) meat/fish
Now look through this text quickly to check the categories:

(or in 5 slides below)
Why are these foods important?

Skim through the whole text again to decide which is the best answer:

a) Because they are healthier than Western food
b) Because they taste great
c) Because they are local and cheaper than imported food
d) Because they are better for the soil
e) Because they value local culture (that was taken away by colonisers)
f) All of the above
Our first stop is Kenya, East Africa. It is the home of Njathi Kabui. He is a famous organic chef, activist, and speaker. Chef Kabui was born in 1968, five years after independence. He grew up on a farm near Mount Kenya, on his family’s land. ‘We had fruit trees: papayas, guava, oranges, lemons, loquats, sugar cane, avocados – all kinds of stuff,’ Kabui tells me on the phone from his home in North Carolina, US. ‘We had grain: corn, wheat, millet; and we grew pumpkins, sweet potatoes, yams, carrots, and cassava. There were cows and pigs once to sell, and we kept chickens and pigeons for their meat…’

Society needs to think again about ingredients, Kabui says. Over the past twenty years he has developed the idea of ‘food literacy’, which he thinks is as important as academic literacy. He gives seminars about this idea and has also helped start community gardens to grow raspberries, blueberries, figs, strawberries, herbs, and vegetables.

‘Many corporations have confused how we think about food, what to eat, and how to eat it.’ says Kabui. He feels sad that colonization by Britain took away much of Kenya’s own food culture.

To help bring back this knowledge, he’s returning to his family’s land, this time to build the Thayu Food Literacy and Sustainability Centre near Lake Naivasha. It will have a library on black food history and its chefs, and an international kitchen with the very best of African food, with the best wild ingredients from the land.

Kabui tells me how in Africa they use only a few grain types – maize, wheat and rice – but there are many indigenous types of grain. Millet, a nutritious wholegrain, has a special place in Kabui’s heart. He tells me about a recipe for a warm salad. He mixes millet with black-eyed peas, and lots of vegetables. He adds honey and warm spices such as cardamom.

We talk about an ingredient called ngai ngai: young leaves from the hibiscus plant. With citrus, the flower can make hot or cold tea; we can also use the leaves as a seasoning. Ngai ngai brings out the flavours of grains and salads and makes wonderful sauces – this, he says, is a great example of how to season food without using processed seasoning.
b) Chef **Fatmata Binta** is from Ghana, West Africa. She says that with the new ingredients like MSG and artificial additives, it’s hard to really experience pure traditional African flavours. She remembers how on a trip to north Ghana she mostly ate food seasoned with only locust bean and local salt. She introduces me to another ingredient: **dawadawa**, a pod with a soft, sweet, yellow pulp that grows on the locust bean tree.

‘Africa is so much more than just jollof rice,’ Binta says. When she first tasted dawadawa, she loved its umami flavour with flavours of dark chocolate and cocoa. Binta says that they harvest the pod, ferment its seeds, then dry them. They use them whole, ground into a powder, or in a paste and add them to many traditional African dishes such as okra soup and egusi, a soup made with ground melon seeds.

Binta was born into the nomadic Fulani community. She lived first in Sierra Leone and then in neighbouring Guinea. In 2017, she started the Fulani Kitchen, a pop-up restaurant for guests around Ghana. It is there to show the cooking and culture of her childhood.

The Fulani are one of the biggest nomadic communities in the world. Historically, they have travelled throughout West Africa for pasture for their cattle. As they move from place to place, they borrow ideas from the local people, ingredients change, and they get different influences.

Fulani sun-dry almost everything they eat: herbs, vegetables, spices, and meat. Sun-drying preserves food and limits food waste. This makes their lifestyle very sustainable. They eat some animal products, but the Fulani diet does not include much meat. When they kill the animals, they sell the meat at local markets and Fulani families mostly eat the offal, which they will also dry. They also eat grains: millet, maize and local rice. Binta speaks of her favourite dish as a child that she now serves to her guests: a steamed corn couscous served with fresh yoghurt, made from fermented cows’ milk – so sweet you don’t need sugar.
Like Kabui, Binta feels that we need to rethink how we use ingredients. There is not much change in the demand for local foods in rural areas. People still hold on to old traditions, and they prefer a slower approach when preparing and eating food. In cities diets and desires are changing as highly processed foods enter African markets.

In Ghana, Binta says, it’s more often rich people that choose unhealthy food. Because they don’t have money to buy expensive imported products, poorer people will choose to eat local food. ‘A poor person can only get beans, which contain so much protein,’ she says. ‘A poor person prefers local smoked fish more than beef or sausages that are full of bad ingredients.’

She is working with women farmers in northern Ghana, to grow and harvest fonio, an ancient grain, which is for sweet and savoury dishes. Fonio is delicate but it is strong in a drought, nutritious, fast growing – and delicious. Binta works with the company Sassou Fonio, which teaches farming techniques to women and makes sure they receive a good price for their crop. Over 40 per cent of the population work on the land in Ghana, but many cannot sell enough to make a good living. Binta wants to change that.

c) Pierre Thiam is a Senegalese chef and he also supports fonio. He owns two restaurants, one in New York, US, and one in Lagos, Nigeria. He also owns Yolélé, a food company that produces fonio and it wants to really support local ingredients. His company works with smallholder farmers across West Africa, and it wants to give job security and safeguard biodiversity, and help to make sure that we don’t lose these products.

Thiam grew up in Dakar, the capital of Senegal. He says it is ‘one of the most exciting food cultures in the world’.

‘Dakar is a very interesting mixture. As a port, we have a diet of seafood and grains, but as Senegal was for many years the entrance to Africa from other countries, many different flavours have come into its food for hundreds of years.’
Thiam grew up eating fresh, home-cooked meals. He is worried that ingredients he saw when he grew up are disappearing. ‘Often in Senegal we have this colonial way of thinking and we don’t value these local products. In the supermarkets in Dakar you see all Western products but you only see about 10 per cent of our local products,’ he says.

With Yolélé, Thiam wants to take back control of diets and the food system. ‘The market is not only full of bad food, but bad food controls it. Big agriculture forces diets on us that are limited to only four crops. You eat rice or soy, wheat or corn and we just ignore grains like fonio,’ he says.

Growing only these four crops is having a bad effect on the planet, he says. Industrial agriculture generates greenhouse gases (around 30 per cent of the global total) and abuses the water supply, with 70 per cent of the planet’s water used for these four crops alone. But, Thiam says, indigenous crops like fonio, millet, or sorghum don’t need as much water and are also much more nutritious.

There are many ways to eat fonio. The traditional way in Senegal is with okra: ‘a pair matched in heaven’ as Thiam describes it. During the summer, at his New York restaurant, he serves fonio with sweet roasted beetroot and spicy carrots, pickled with scotch bonnet chilies and, for dessert, fonio pudding with coconut milk and roasted mango.

Another crop Thiam wants to grow is bambara beans. They taste much like peanuts, but do not have any of the allergens. They grew in West Africa until peanuts, which are far easier to process, took over the market. But bambara beans are much more nutritious and are traditionally grown on rotation with fonio. That keeps the soil healthy.

Thiam wants to grow fonio with other traditional crops with methods developed over hundreds of years. ‘We are trying to support the farmers in a way that they can understand,’ he says. ‘The agricultural revolution brought chemical fertilizers, and stopped the seasons. These things have terrible results. This is why we have to return to the system of rotation, which allows the soil to breathe and to rest.’
Our last chef, Omer Eltigani, grew up in Sudan. From a young age he watched the women who raised him in the kitchen. Now he is making a reputation as a chef. His first book *Sudanese Kitchen* is due out later in 2021. Eltigani wants to use food to show a clearer picture of his country.

‘When you hear of Sudan, you might think of war and think it is a destructive place,’ he tells me on the phone from his grandfather’s house in the capital, Khartoum. ‘But Sudan is very rich and diverse, with a wonderful food culture that people really need to understand and value.’

Sudan has a sophisticated cuisine with deep historical roots. When he was writing *Sudanese Kitchen*, Omer got information from all over the country, visiting different villages and communities, and collected recipes that show the country’s great variety.

Just a few people (often grandmothers) know how to make these dishes. They take patience. And as times change, young people are not learning the skills to continue the food culture. Omer wants to make sure we do not lose these cooking traditions. He has collected and learned the recipes and serves them at pop-up events.

Mullah is a common Sudanese meal that Omer likes. Made with onions and meat, usually ground, and blended vegetables, you eat mullah with different breads and cooked grains that you can make into porridge, dumplings, or asseeda. Asseeda is similar to West African fufu but instead made with flour, yeast, and sometimes added butter. Another classic food is kisra, a fermented crepe. When the batter is ready, you spread it on a hot wide plate and cook it in thin sheets similar to injera in neighbouring Ethiopia. Kisra is made from flour milled from sorghum, which is similar to millet. Its flour is a dull white, with a light texture and naturally gluten free. The flour is mixed with water and yoghurt, and then left to ferment. You eat it with stews and many Sudanese dishes.

Omer would love to bring back the agricultural schemes in Sudan that make the most of the country’s farming potential, increase access to local ingredients, and reduce the demand for imported goods.

I am now learning to cook the food I ate when I grew up and more. I was lucky to find some of Chef Binta’s dawadawa in London and I used it as a seasoning for okra soup. I was happy to find that it has a powerful smell but the flavour it gives to the soup is smooth and delicate. A wonderful ingredient. As I begin to try to use the flavours and spices of my grandmother’s cooking, I only hope I can do it well.
Role-play

a) Divide the class into 4 groups: A, B, C and D. Give each group only their section of the text (A, B, C or D).

b) Everyone reads about one chef and makes notes / highlights / underlines key information to become that chef.

c) Re-group so there is one A, one B, one C and one D in each new group.

d) These ‘4 African chefs’ will now talk about the traditional food they like, and plan how they will work together to let everyone know about traditional African food

(see next 3 slides first for helpful language >>>>>>>>>
Before you start the role-play

useful language for suggestions – match:

1. Why don’t …?
2. Let’s …
3. How about …
4. I’d like to suggest that …
5. What about ….?
6. Do you think it’s a good idea ….?

a) ... open a restaurant together?
b) ...we open a restaurant together?
c) ...opening a restaurant together?
d) ...to open a restaurant together?
e) ...we should open a restaurant together.
useful language for .... (fill the gaps)

Agreeing:
1. Great i...! Let’s do it!
2. Brilliant suggestion!
   Well d...!
3. Yes, that’s a r..... good idea!

Disagreeing:
1. Actually, I d.... think we should ..
2. I r..... don’t think that’s a good idea ...
3. I’d p...... not to ...
useful language for ....

Agreeing:
1. Great idea! Let’s do it!
2. Brilliant suggestion! Well done!
3. Yes, that’s a really good idea!

Disagreeing:
1. Actually, I don’t think we should..
2. I really don’t think that’s a good idea ...
3. I’d prefer not to ...
Writing – choose one or more of these writing tasks and work in pairs:

1/ An email to a friend about what you’ve learnt about ‘Freedom Food’
2/ A menu for the new restaurant you discussed
3/ A tweet / Instagram post to promote the new restaurant
4/ An short article about Freedom Food and your new restaurant
Follow-up / homework:

Try this quiz about food waste:
https://eewiki.newint.org/index.php?title=Quiz_about_food_waste
- click here

Read about 9 inspiring food projects:

Read about forest gardens in Ethiopia:
https://eewiki.newint.org/index.php?title=Very_old_forest_gardens_are_stopping_hunger_in_Ethiopia